

Provoked to Speech

Biblical Hermeneutics as Conversation

Edited by
R. Bieringer, R. Burggraeve,
E. Nathan & M. Steegen

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“Do you understand what you are reading?”
(Acts 8:30): On the Place and
Role of Exegesis*

PIERRE VAN HECKE

Anyone who surveys the exegetical landscape cannot but be struck by its vast fragmentation. Most books of the Bible have, by now, generated such secondary literature that no single exegete can still claim to be a specialist of more than one biblical book, or at best of more than a small number. At the same time, during the last decades the methodological diversity within exegesis has increased exponentially. Where up to around ten years ago only the historical-critical method was employed, this method – that has not in the least disappeared and is still being developed further – has acquired quite a number of other approaches from synchronic text-orientated readings, to reader-orientated methods, and to approaches that examine the biblical text from the perspective of other human sciences.

In this essay, I will not attempt to provide an overview of these different methods or to sketch the main lines along which the discipline should develop in terms of methodology. Given the diversity just described, that would also not be possible within the scope of this essay. The challenge to biblical studies lies, in my opinion, not in the first place in its further methodological development, however important it is, but rather more fundamentally in re-determining its position and in accentuating its objectives. The question therefore not only is *how* biblical studies should operate in the future but also – and indeed in the first place – *what* it must do and *why* it should

* Originally published as “Begrijpt ge wat ge leest?” (Hand 8,30) – Over de plaats en rol van de Bijbelwetenschap,” in: *Tijdschrift voor Theologie* 51/1 (2011) 7-19.

do so, as put in the words of Sandra Schneiders.¹ Even though these questions were seldom posed in an explicit manner within biblical studies, in these last few years they have gradually received more attention. This collection of essays on hermeneutics offers an excellent opportunity to reflect on the matter further. The issue is all the more important because the role and value of biblical studies are often assessed and questioned in a rather critical manner by the other theological disciplines and by the faith communities.

To be able to answer the questions regarding the uniqueness and objectives of biblical studies, one obviously needs to start with a reflection on the nature of the object of research itself. What biblical studies is or ought to be depends on the answer to the question what is its object, viz. the Bible. In my opinion, a number of aspects take on central importance in answering that question: the Bible is, on the one hand, a collection of historical texts which, on the other hand, were and are read within faith communities as inspiring and normative, to wit, as the Word of God. In the following paragraphs, I would like to develop these aspects further and examine their consequences for biblical studies. The aspect that the Bible is the text of faith communities has received little explicit attention in recent biblical studies, and the relevance of this fact for biblical studies is not undisputed. I will therefore begin my discussion with this aspect. Next, I will reflect more in depth on the question what it means that the Bible is a *text*, where I shall also comment on the fact that has most come to the attention of exegesis since the Enlightenment, namely that the Bible is a text – or more correctly: a collection of very diverse texts – that has *grown through the course of history*.

I. The Bible as text of faith communities

The Bible is fundamentally the text of faith communities in different ways.² First and foremost, the text originated within the

¹ S. Schneiders, *The Revelatory Text: Interpreting the New Testament as Sacred Scripture*, Collegeville 1999, 21.

² This is also one of the starting points of Schneiders' *The Revelatory Text*, in particular in her third chapter, 64-94. In the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation

context of such communities. Without communities that have tried to understand, to live out and to liturgically celebrate their faith, the biblical writings would not have arisen and would not have been handed down materially through the centuries. It is only due to the exceptional character of these writings as Word of God for both Jews and Christians that ever new generations took the trouble to copy the texts. Without them biblical studies would not have had an object of study.

Also today the Bible is the text of faith communities before it is the object of biblical studies. Having said that, this does not mean that these communities of readers would have a monopoly on the Bible nor that the Bible would not find any readers outside of these communities. Thus there are readers who take on the text primarily for literary or (cultural-)historical reasons. The fact of the matter is, however, that the text is primarily read in these communities – mainly in a liturgical context – and that the community celebrating the liturgy is thus the primary locus where the Bible belongs. Until recently, there was little reflection within biblical studies on this issue; the manner in which readers – including the researchers themselves – deal with the biblical text in concrete contexts did not belong to the primary research questions of biblical studies, and neither did the question what it means that the Bible was and is being read by most of its readers as the Word of God. In itself it is of course perfectly possible to read the biblical text exclusively or primarily as an historical source or to study its influence on the development of Western culture and art for instance. The question, however, is whether biblical studies does justice to the uniqueness of its object when it limits itself to these questions.³ In my opinion, the discipline cannot shirk the fundamental reflection on the relationship of the Bible to its primary locus. In addition, even historical

Verbum Domini (2010, nr. 29) it is repeated that this forms the point of departure for Biblical interpretation in the (Roman Catholic) church.

³ In this essay, I explicitly deal with *biblical studies* (as a theological discipline) and not with West Semitic linguistics and literature study, which would partly be another story.

or cultural-historical research takes place *because* the text has significance for a community of readers. In this regard, Ben Vedder has rightly referred to Hans-Georg Gadamer's remark that even the most technical analyses would not be performed on texts that have no substantive significance for readers: 'even the motive for historical-critical research is to be found in the expressive power of the text.'⁴ The scientific attention and the – also financial – resources that a society wants to make available for the study of this text are directly proportional to the importance of the text for the self-understanding – directly or indirectly – of that community.

If this is so, biblical studies need to define themselves also on the basis of the fact that the Bible has a particular significance for faith communities understanding their own identity on the basis of this text as the Word of God and gathering around that text.

II. The Bible as text

This fact goes hand in hand with the central characteristic of the bible, namely that it is a *text*. Texts are in the first place linguistic expressions and as such aim at communicating meaning. Meaning is what defines a text *as text*.⁵ If this is true, biblical studies should consistently reflect on how its own functioning and methods relate to the meaning of the text. This question, however, can only be answered when it is clear how meaning arises when reading a text. We thereby touch upon the central, hermeneutical question that must form the starting point of biblical studies as a whole if this wants to do justice to the specificity of its object. Given the centrality of this question, I would like to reflect longer on the matter in the following pages.

⁴ B. Vedder, *Was ist Hermeneutik?: Ein Weg von der Textdeutung zur Interpretation der Wirklichkeit*, Stuttgart 2000, 163.

⁵ Compare with what J.-L. Marion, *Étant donné: Essai d'une phénoménologie de la donation*, Paris 1997, 69, says about books: 'In order [...] to see a book as book [...] I must see it not as a thing (what the bibliophile and the illiterate do in a hardly indistinguishable manner), but as meaning'.

A. *Hermeneutics between explanation and understanding*

In the recent history of philosophical hermeneutics, it has been strongly emphasised that meaning arises in the interaction between a text and its reader(s) and that the meaning of the text can and must be distinguished from the significance for the reader.⁶ The interpretative process thus consists of a double, dialectical movement between two distinct but inseparable poles which Ricœur, following Dilthey, describes as explanation (*expliquer, erklären*) on the one hand and understanding (*comprendre, verstehen*) on the other.⁷ The movement between both poles is double, as Ricœur explains: considering that in a (written) text there exists a fundamental distance between text and reader, the first understanding cannot be more than a naive conjecture on the structure and meaning of the text. This conjecture must be validated by an objective explanation of the text, which can pronounce judgment on the different ways of structuring and understanding the text. In a first movement *understanding* thus needs *explanation* in order to validate itself.⁸ With the explanation, however, reading has not yet reached its destination, Ricœur emphasises.⁹ One does not read literary texts in the first place in order to explain, but to understand, and then not so much to understand the *text*, but rather to understand *oneself* and one's own manner of being-in-the-world, explains the French philosopher following Heidegger.¹⁰ Reading then becomes the response or the counterpart of the movement of the text towards the reader: every text unlocks a manner of being-in-the-world and invites the reader to appropriate this unlocking and to understand oneself in the manner suggested in the text. From the *explanation* a full process of interpretation must return in a second movement to the *understanding* of the text.

⁶ E.D. Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation*, New Haven 1967.

⁷ P. Ricœur, 'What is a Text. Explanation and Understanding', in: Id., *From Text to Action. Essays in Hermeneutics II*, Evanston 1991, 110-112.

⁸ P. Ricœur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning*, Fort Worth 1976, 75-79.

⁹ Ricœur, 'What is a Text', 118.

¹⁰ Ricœur, *Interpretation Theory*, 37.

In that way, for Ricœur, every interpretation brings a recontextualisation of the text in a new context. In his view, this is possible and even necessary due to the decontextualisation that every text undergoes in the writing process itself:¹¹ putting down in writing negates both the relationship between author and text as well as the immediate relationship of the text with the world.¹² The suspension of the direct reference of the text to reality, Ricœur continues, is the condition of possibility for a reference of the second order, this time at the level of Heidegger's 'being-in-the-world', which is contextualised in the reading.¹³

B. *The hermeneutical process as metaphorisation*

The question, however, is whether the hermeneutical process can best be conceptualised in terms of the de- and recontextualisation. On the one hand, one can pose the question whether written texts indeed are so autonomous with regard to their original context and the intention of the author, as Ricœur proposes.¹⁴ Cognitive and functional linguistics have demonstrated, on the one hand, that the linguistic building blocks of texts cannot possibly be seen apart from the cognitive processes of the authors that produced them. There is no language possible apart from the concrete communicative and cognitive context of the speaker/author.¹⁵ On the other hand, it is not so that there is no situation common to the author

¹¹ P. Ricœur, 'The Hermeneutical Function of Distanciation', in: Id., *From Text to Action. Essays in Hermeneutics II*, Evanston 1991, 83.

¹² Ricœur, 'What is a Text', 108.

¹³ Ricœur, 'Hermeneutical Function', 85-86. This brief description of Ricœur's view on reading does no full justice to the rich manner in which he has described it in numerous publications, but in the context of this essay it will suffice. For a more extensive treatment, see P. Van Hecke, *From Linguistics to Hermeneutics: A Functional and Cognitive Approach to Job 12-14*, Leiden 2011, 8-21.

¹⁴ Cf. my *From Linguistics to Hermeneutics*, especially: 37-43.

¹⁵ R. Langacker, *Foundations of Cognitive Grammar*, 1: *Theoretical Prerequisites*, Stanford 1987, 12-13; S. Dik/K. Hengeveld, *The Theory of Functional Grammar*, 1: *The Structure of the Clause*, Berlin/New York 1997, 1.

and the reader:¹⁶ even though the immediate here-and-now situation has been annulled, there still very much is a context (partially) shared between author and reader, if only because both are human beings with all this entails.¹⁷ The distance in time and space between author and reader brings about some difficulty (at times quite serious), but not an impossibility, in the interpretation of texts.

A second reason why the hermeneutical process should rather not be conceived of in terms of de- and recontextualisation is that these concepts can at least give the impression that the text contains an abstract – detached from the context – and unchanging core of meaning that can be passed on. Even though the term is not used in this narrow sense in Boeve's much more dynamic model of recontextualisation, the term does imply this danger.¹⁸

To me, it seems better to understand the hermeneutical or interpretative process as the terms themselves indicate, namely as a form of *translation*.¹⁹ What this means and implies can be made clear by means of an intermediate translation step, which has little etymological pretence. In many languages, the word for translation can be described literally as 'to take [something] across', as for instance in the German *Über-setzung*, the Dutch *over-zetten*, the French *tra-duction*, the English *trans-lation*, but also in the Greek *meta-pherō*. From the latter term, one likewise derived the word 'metaphor' of which the Greek precursor already had the meaning the term has in current English, namely that of the transfer of meaning of a word. This indicates that the process of translation displays structural similarities with metaphor, and that consequently

¹⁶ Ricœur, 'Hermeneutical Function', 85: 'For there is no longer a situation common to the writer and the reader, and the concrete conditions of the act of pointing no longer exist.'

¹⁷ Dik/Hengeveld, *Functional Grammar*, 10.

¹⁸ L. Boeve, *Interrupting Tradition. An essay on Christian Faith in a Postmodern Context* (Louvain Theological and Pastoral Monographs, 30), Leuven - Grand Rapids 2003.

¹⁹ The Greek *hermèneuō* means both 'to explain' as well as 'to translate', just as much as the Latin *interpre*s means 'translator/spokesperson' and 'interpreter'.

the hermeneutical process can be understood as a form of metaphorisation. From his research, among others, on the New Testament parables and on intertextuality Ricœur has also made proposals in this direction.²⁰

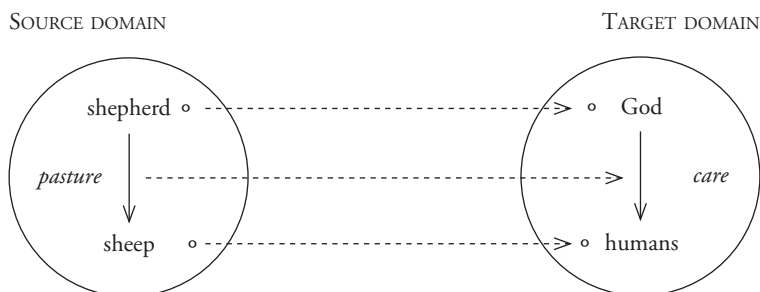
In cognitive linguistics, the phenomenon of the metaphor has received a great deal of attention in the last three decades. The insights that have been developed can illuminate what the hermeneutical process – understood as metaphorisation – is all about. Lakoff and Johnson, the founding fathers of cognitive metaphor theory, describe this phenomenon in its most simple form as the ‘understanding of one thing in terms of another’.²¹ What is important here is that the metaphor is, in the first place, a (very common) way of thinking and not only a figure of speech. In a more formalised way, in metaphor the knowledge of one domain of knowledge is used to structure our understanding of another domain that can be described less directly. When God for instance is called shepherd, an appeal is made on the domain of knowledge of the *animal husbandry* to conceptualise the domain of *God-human relationship*. Because this movement is unidirectional, one distinguishes between the ‘source domain’ and the ‘target domain’, between which a relationship exists that, in analogy to mathematics, is called a ‘mapping’ relationship.²² Not only elements from the source domain are mapped onto elements from the target domain, but also relationships and properties from the source domain can, if applicable, be mapped. In the example just given: the metaphor ‘God is shepherd’ does not only contain a mapping relationship between shepherd and sheep on the one hand, and

²⁰ P. Ricœur, ‘Imagination in Discourse and Action’ in: Id., *From Text to Action. Essays in Hermeneutics II*, Evanston 1991, 168-187; P. Ricœur, ‘The Bible and the Imagination’, in: Id., *Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative and Imagination*, Minneapolis 1995, 144-166. I thank Ming Yeung Cheung, doctoral researcher at K.U.Leuven, for the reference to the last article mentioned.

²¹ G. Lakoff/M. Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*, Chicago 1980, 5: ‘The essence of metaphor is understanding one kind of thing in terms of another’.

²² Cf. G. Lakoff/M. Turner, *More than Cool Reason: A Field Guide to Poetic Metaphor*, Chicago/London 1989, 62-63.

respectively God and humans on the other, but it also implies that the relationship between God and humans is understood in terms of the relationship between shepherd and sheep and even that characteristics of the shepherd and the sheep can be mapped on those of God and, in this case, of humans. In a rather simplified visual scheme, it would look as follows:



Two remarks are of importance here for what follows: firstly, the scheme above could suggest that mapping relationships only come to play between pre-existing, uniform structures in the source and target domains. In other words, that it is due to pre-existing similarities between source and target that the metaphor can come to exist. That, however, is not the case: the essence of metaphors is that the target domain acquires a (partially) *new* structuring on the basis of the structure present in the source domain. In other words: knowledge of the source domain *generates* a new understanding of the target domain.²³ A second comment is that metaphorical mapping relationships are always selective and partial: by far not all knowledge from the source domain can be mapped in a meaningful way onto the target domain, and conversely a target domain will never be conceptualised exhaustively on the basis of one single source domain. To return to the shepherding example: the rather central fact that shepherds in the end keep a flock to provide for their own livelihood and that they therefore sell, slaughter, shear or milk the animals for their own benefit, is kept entirely out of the

²³ Lakoff/Turner, *More than Cool Reason*, 62.

picture in the metaphorical conceptualisation of God as shepherd.²⁴ In the research, this general characteristic of metaphors often gives rise to discussions on the criteria for distinguishing between legitimate and illegitimate interpretations of a metaphor. As a response to this question, the so-called Invariance Principle has been formulated, which states that mappings from the source domain can only be accepted when they do not violate the basic structure of the target domain.²⁵ In our own example: the possible conceptualisation that God would kill people for God's own gain – as a shepherd does with sheep – violates the basic structure of the relationship between God and humans to the extent that this is seen as unacceptable.

C. *Hermeneutics of religious texts*

The hermeneutical process that unfolds when people read religious – and, in extension: all literary – texts transpires in a similar manner.²⁶ People read, as Ricoeur pointed out, in order to understand themselves and their way of being-in-the-world. In the terms of metaphor theory, this being-in-the-world then comprises the target domain of the interpretation process.²⁷ The meaning of the text that lies before us thereby functions as the source domain: we endeavour to understand our own existence in terms of what the text has to offer us. Elements (including properties and relationships) from the source domain are mapped onto elements from the target domain. This typically occurs when readers identify themselves with the characters of a story or when readers recognise their own situation in certain twists of plot or in the relationships between characters. More than only recognition, however, the hermeneutical process also generates new insights into one's own

²⁴ Israel's wicked shepherds in Ez 34,3 are accused precisely of doing so.

²⁵ G. Lakoff, 'The Invariance Hypothesis: Is Abstract Reason Based on Image-schemas?', *Cognitive Linguistics* 1 (1990) 39-74.

²⁶ Compare also with M. Turner, *The Literary Mind: The Origins of Thought and Language*, New York/London 1996.

²⁷ That the hermeneutical process can be understood as a metaphorical process says absolutely nothing about the historicity of the facts described in the text.

existence whereby the reading material brings about a transformative process in the reader and can instigate concrete actions.²⁸

Rather than searching for the decontextualised world or meaning that the text would unfold in order to, subsequently, recontextualise it, the hermeneutical process aims at mapping a fully contextualised text as source domain in a metaphoric process onto the target domain. Just as in the metaphor, this mapping is partial and selective: not every element of the text as source domain can be mapped meaningfully onto the target domain. This selective mapping, however, is at the same time the strength of texts: not every element of the text needs to be mapped in order to speak of a transformative reading. Different readers/groups of readers, separated from each other in time and space, can read the same text and each time transpose other elements from it onto their own existence. In that way no single reading can exhaust the text's metaphorical meaning potential.

III. The role of biblical studies

When the Bible should be understood in the first place as a text that provides meaning and when the hermeneutical process implies a metaphorical transfer from the text to the being-in-the-world of the reader, how can the role of biblical studies then be understood?

The specific task of biblical studies in my opinion consists in studying the source domain of the hermeneutical process, namely the biblical text itself, *qua* the source domain of this process. Biblical studies needs to operate explicitly from the perspective of this hermeneutical process. Developing current metaphorisations of the biblical text is not the task of biblical studies alone, but more broadly of theology as a whole, and this along with and in service of the faith communities. And yet biblical studies needs to be aware of these contextually determined metaphorisations and become involved, more than the present case, with these readings whereby the text can realise itself as text. For this purpose, what is needed is a much more

²⁸ Lakoff/Turner, *More than Cool Reason*, 64-65.

close cooperation with other theological disciplines, systematic as well as practical, and eventually with the faith communities for whom the text has a transformative meaning. At the same time, this raises the difficult question to what extent it is important for the discipline that the biblical studies scholar sees the Bible as the Word of God, whatever content he or she desires to give to that qualification. On the one hand, much biblical studies research can be carried out from an outsider's perspective although even these technical analyses regularly include interpretative choices that are influenced – consciously or otherwise – by the ideology of the researcher. On the other hand, when one desires to investigate the text in the way it presents itself, namely as the witness to what the text itself calls the encounter between God and humans, then an 'openness for the religious truth claims of the text' is a minimal condition.²⁹

In all this, biblical studies enjoys the specific role of safeguarding that justice is done to the text in the hermeneutical process. Even though it is in the interaction with the reader that significance arises and even though the text offers a potential for significance to its readers, every text likewise resists its readers. Metaphorising mappings are only valid when they respect the significance and structure of the text. In that way, biblical studies has a double function – constructive as well as critical – in the hermeneutical process: on the one hand, it studies the text in such a way that it can function as a source domain in this process; on the other, it safeguards the hermeneutical process so that the distinctiveness and meaning of the source domain, the text, remain respected.

This does not mean that biblical studies would have to take on a different methodology. The biblical text has indeed always stood in the centre of its attention. The discipline, however, is challenged to conceptualise and further develop its methods in such a way that the contribution of each of these methods to its ultimate objective becomes clear. I conclude this essay with a very brief description of the role that the different methods can play in this global task of biblical studies.

²⁹ Schneiders, *The Revelatory Text*, 61.

a. *Text critical* research plays an important, preparatory role in all biblical research, even though the *hermeneutical* consequences of text-critical research are often not very fundamental; for that reason, communities of readers will rather make a pragmatic choice for one or the other text form. An insight into and an acknowledgement of the transmission process that the text went through as a material object, however, is of central importance in order to deal correctly with the text. The reason is twofold: on the one hand, this process of careful transmission reflects the value that the text has had for generations of readers; and on the other, insight into this process has a critical function against absolutising one text form over against others.

b. In order to function as the source domain of the hermeneutical process, the text first of all needs to be understood *linguistically*. Solid semantic, syntactic and pragmatic research thus forms the starting point of biblical research. It is a fortunate opportunity for exegesis that in the last decades meaning has become the main focus of linguistics, after a period where the formal characteristics of language received the most attention. The meaning of words and expressions and how they relate to human thought is central in cognitive linguistics, while functional approaches in linguistics investigate, among other things, how sentence structure directs the communicative interaction between speaker and listener (or writer and reader). The study of language is in that manner always a study of the conceptualisation of reality, which is essential for a good understanding of a text. Serious language study, on the other hand, also has a critical function where it can warn against a too simplistic and obvious equation of our conceptualisation with that of the biblical text. Even though, for instance, the Hebrew לב (*leb*) is customarily translated as 'heart', both concepts only very partially overlap. Translating these recent linguistic insights further in biblical studies will open up interesting hermeneutical perspectives.³⁰

³⁰ See my book *From Linguistics to Hermeneutics*. See further E. Van Wolde, *Reframing Biblical Studies: When Language and Text Meet Culture, Cognition and Context*, Winona Lake 2009.

c. Meaning, however, not only arises on the level of words and sentences, but also on the level of text structure: individual sentences acquire their meaning only by means of their place within a broader *literary* whole. The way in which the text is structured indeed leads the reader through the meaning of that text. Literary analysis of the text – narrative, poetic, rhetorical – exposing its structure thus plays an important role in hermeneutically oriented biblical studies. The developments that these methods have gone through during the last decades should be received as very positive.³¹ Such literary research, however, likewise has the task of formulating critical reflections on the selective use of biblical verses as *verba probantia* in theological or spiritual arguments that have little bearing with the content of the text as a whole. At the same time, Biblical studies should continue to resist, in my opinion, against the practice of shortening biblical texts for liturgical use or of leaving out certain verses. Since literary analysis has made clear how carefully biblical texts have been constructed and how this structure is constitutive for the meaning of the text, then such a way of dealing with the text cannot be sustained.

d. The biblical text is fundamentally a *historical* text. As already mentioned above, a text cannot be detached from the context wherein it came to existence, if only because understanding the language presupposes knowledge of the world in which that language is used. The historical and archaeological study of the context wherein the text came to existence therefore remains essential for the understanding of the text, even when that text is primarily seen as the source domain for a hermeneutical process, as I have proposed here.³² The best possible knowledge of the text – including

³¹ J. Fokkelman, *Vertelkunst in de bijbel*, Zoetermeer, 1999; J. Fokkelman, *Dichtkunst in de bijbel*, Zoetermeer 2000; J. Fokkelman/W. Weren (red.), *De Bijbel literair*, Zoetermeer 2003.

³² In my opinion, this is not concerned with the fact that the intention of the original author or the historical significance would be normative in the hermeneutical process. In line with what I wrote earlier, the historical text has a 'metaphorical normativity', a concept that I hope to develop further in another essay.

its relationship to the context – remains the prerequisite for a valid interpretation of the text (*validation*).³³

Considering that many biblical books have a complex redactional history, it is likewise crucial to map out this history in the best possible way. Even though it often remains very difficult to distinguish and to date with precision the different redactional phases and interventions in the text, the insight into the contextual embeddedness of the biblical texts and the historical evolution of theological ideas have an important critical function over against a monolithic manner of dealing with the text. At the same time, this process demonstrates how in changing contexts, earlier texts came to form part of a new literary whole in the redaction process and thus acquire in the biblical text itself a new interpretation. In itself, this is already a historical argument for a constant hermeneusis of the texts in ever-new contexts.

The different research methods in current biblical studies thus each have a constructive and a critical role with regard to the hermeneutical process in which the biblical text is involved. It is charged with the task of contributing to and safeguarding the validity of this process. However, biblical studies alone cannot determine what is a relevant, life-giving and transformative interpretation for (faith) communities. That is the role of the communities as a whole.

³³ What is important there is that historical and archaeological research should not have the function of illustrating the Biblical text, but rather of sketching the context within which the text must be understood.